

Post 12/19/93

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Few Votes For the Press

Public to the press: You're not getting it.

That's the message I read in a new poll from the National Opinion Research Center. The survey says the public's faith in the press has fallen to the lowest level in the 20 years the NORC has been measuring America's confidence in its institutions.

The numbers, to get it over with, are these: Only 11 percent of those surveyed say they have "a great deal" of confidence in the press. Another 39 percent say they have "hardly any,"

Ombudsman

and 49 percent told the interviewers they have "only some." In 1993 the "great deal" group had fallen 5.7 percentage points, and the "hardly any" people had grown from 28 percent.

Since 1973 the NORC's General Social Survey has been asking the public the same question about Congress, the executive branch, the press, the military, major companies, organized labor, the Supreme Court, banks, medicine, television, education and organized religion.

Tom Smith, who directs the survey, points out that 11 of the 13 institutions fell in the public's esteem this year, six to their lowest point ever. He thinks the drop in confidence in the press is part of a general disenchantment with institutions.

And the press is in good company down in the basement of the public's confidence. Only 7 percent had "a great deal" of confidence in Congress, and 41 percent had "hardly any." Organized Labor inspires "a great deal" of confidence from 8 percent and "hardly any" from 32 percent. In absolute numbers, the press is third from the bottom (and hadn't dropped so much as six other institutions).

I wish I could find some comfort in that.

And I wish I could find tidy, logical correlations: that in 20 years, what the

press is proud of would bring more public confidence and its embarrassments less. I can't.

Along with journalism's greatest public service in the two decades, the investigation of Watergate, and its worst moment, the fiction of Janet Cooke, there were controversies over coverage of Gary Hart and the 1988 presidential campaign, Arthur Ashe, Grenada and the Persian Gulf War, the S&L scandal and Iran-contra.

But in the years where those might show up, confidence levels got better and worse at the same time, better when it seemed they'd be worse, or the numbers changed too little to mean anything.

Individual successes and failures don't predict changes in public trust. So the explanation must be somewhere else.

I wouldn't pretend that people who unload on the ombudsman are a scientific sample. But perhaps readers who voice complaints about The Post and about "the media" provide some clues to why the public has so soured on the press.

People who write or call find as many ways of saying this as there are stories and pictures and headlines and news judgments to use as illustrations. But the objections they raise gather themselves into four public conclusions:

- News judgments and news reports are filtered through biases.
- Coverage is immaterial or incomplete, out of touch with what's important to readers and what they value.
- Journalism is cynical, refusing to see or reflect anything that's good or wholesome.
- Journalists and newspapers are self-serving and self-important.

Journalism has been talking about its disconnect with the public for, oh, a dozen or so years now. And all this time, the public faith has been, despite small blips and plateaus, steadily on the decline.

I think individual journalists and newspapers believe they can't do anything about the public's perception of the press. Or they're satisfied that they are the exception. Or they think readers don't recognize quality journalism when it lands on their doorstep.

Mr. Smith says people answering the question about the press are reflecting whether they are satisfied with the newspaper they're getting.

The press is not a monolith that can right itself. But, one by one, writers, reporters and photographers and editors can stop giving individual readers examples that collectively tell them that the press is biased or irrelevant or inaccurately negative or arrogant.

One thing's certain: If almost nine out of 10 people have "only some" or "hardly any" confidence in the press, then I doubt that we can say anymore that that's the public's problem.